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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002158

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SUBJECT: BRV DERIDES BADUEL, OPPOSITION REACTS SLOWLY

REF: A. CARACAS 02135

[1](#)B. CARACAS 01384

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: President Hugo Chavez and other senior Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) officials wasted no time in harshly criticizing ex-Defense Minister Raul Baduel for his November 5 press conference urging Venezuelans to vote "NO" in the constitutional referendum. On the other hand, PODEMOS, until recently a party allied with the Venezuelan president, said they supported Baduel's remarks and announced that they would campaign against the reforms. General sentiment about Baduel's motivation is divided, but the fact that someone so close to Chavez is openly criticizing his reforms gives the opposition some timely momentum. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The government's response to Baduel's remarks was immediate and harsh. President Chavez called Baduel "a traitor" and a "loose screw" during a November 5 telephone interview on the pro-government news show "Counterpunch" likening reform critics to a "nest of scorpions". During a November 7 speech, Chavez said "traitors would be relegated to the latrine of history." Vice President Jorge Rodriguez dismissed the former Defense Minister's appeal to the military as no more than a "light breeze" claiming the armed forces remain solidly behind the government. Two other former Chavez-appointed Defense Ministers attempted to trivialize Baduel: General Jorge Carneiro suggested the people would not be fooled by Baduel's "false premises" and Admiral Orlando Maniglia said Baduel was "losing credibility". The BRV has reportedly withdrawn Baduel's personal military security detail.

[1](#)3. (C) Venezuelan opposition parties did not react immediately to the general's about-face. PODEMOS, a party formerly allied with Chavez, announced on November 6 that they would campaign against the reforms and the party formally registered with election authorities as a group advocating a "NO" vote. PODEMOS General Secretary, Ismael Garcia, told the media that calling Baduel a traitor was "cowardly". Ramon Martinez, the PODEMOS governor of Sucre state also endorsed Baduel's views and claimed that Chavez was "losing the reform vote 2-1". (Note: The polling we have seen would not support that contention. End Note). Meanwhile, few of the traditional opposition parties have embraced Baduel or endorsed his views in the media, although opposition activists tell us privately they welcome the development. Un Nuevo Tiempo party leader and Zulia governor Manuel Rosales said that Baduel showed "a deep democratic sentiment" and suggested that Chavez "listen to the man that

returned him to power."

¶4. (C) Some opposition wariness of Baduel appears to stem from the precedent of Venezuela's UN Ambassador Francisco Arias Cardenas. Arias Cardenas was one of the five lieutenant colonels who headed the military coup with President Chavez in 1992 and supported Chavez' successful run for the presidency in 1998. Arias Cardenas later broke with Chavez and ran against him in the 2000 presidential election. He subsequently mended fences with Chavez, was named Venezuela's UN Ambassador, and is likely to be Chavez' candidate for the Zulia governorship in 2008. Against that backdrop, some opposition skeptics question the sincerity of Baduel's break with Chavez. Others perceive him to be just another politically ambitious and potential strongman "caudillo". Baduel is not discounting the possibility of a political career at the moment; we understand he has expressed such an interest to opposition political parties. Right now, however, the retired general appears to be focused on traveling throughout Venezuela urging voters to vote "NO" on the December 2 constitutional referendum.

¶5. (C) Comment: The strong reaction of the BRV served only to focus attention on the former defense minister's criticisms. Baduel's call for a "NO" vote may be starting to have the same effect among members of the opposition and may help build further momentum, not because Baduel himself has any political following, but mainly because someone so close to Chavez is openly standing against Chavez' reforms. One active duty National Guard officer told PolCouns and Army AttachQ on November 7 that the military respects Baduel and noted that the fact he spoke out against the reforms will lead military officers to examine the constitutional package more closely. End Comment.

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